

WMF News

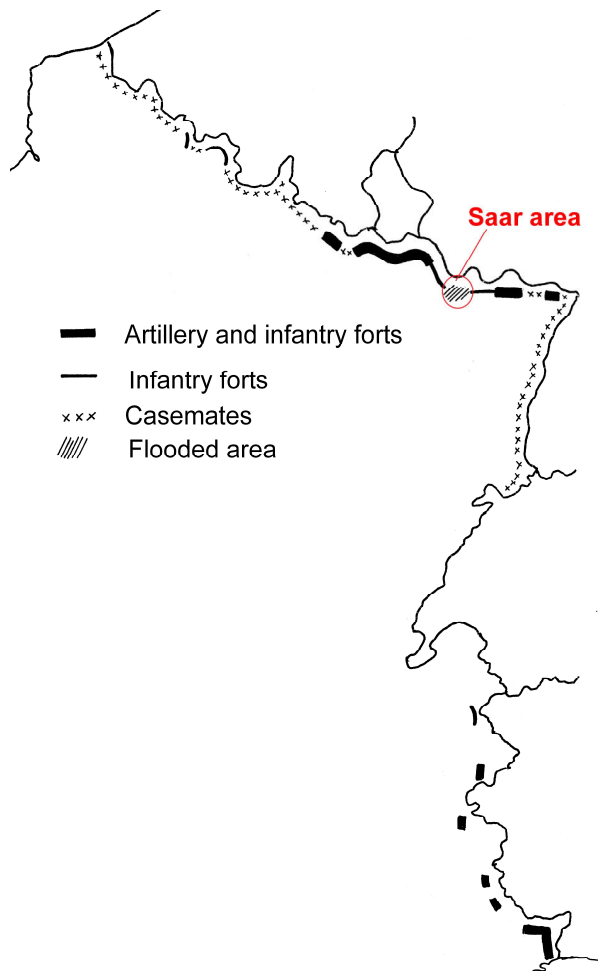
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Composed by Frank PHILIPPART

THE MAGINOT LINE

The reinforced sector of the river Saar

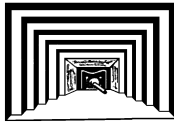
Anyone who reads about the French Maginot Line of World War 2 will realise that the line was built in different phases. He will also discover that there's an area opposite Germany where no forts were built. He'll notice also that the region is rich in lakes and that the River Saar or Sarre, like the French call it, flows through it. The question is why?



The German Saargebiet came under the administration of the United Nations after 1918 and was occupied by France. In 1927 France, in a gesture of good will, withdrew its troops and the area was considered as neutral territory. This had as a consequence that France made no efforts to build fortifications on its side. But after a referendum on 13th January 1935, the Saargebiet chose to return to Germany and therefore the fortification problem popped up again. A solution to this was found on the eastern side of the area by creating artificial water reservoirs to cause controlled flooding in the valleys of the Saar, Moderbach and Albe. Small pillboxes were to keep the dikes under fire. On the west side, brooks were converted into anti-tank moats. Four artillery casemates for 7.5 cm guns and a mass of small bunkers were built for machine guns and 25 mm anti-tank guns. A few advanced positions were added near Biding, Bart-Cappel, Holving and Puttelange, together with a line of STG casemates between Teting and Puttelange and a second line with CEZF casemates between Faulquemont, Sarrable, Sarre Union and Diemerengen. Only a few STG and CEZF casemates were completed by the 10th May 1940.

The plan

The Germans had made plans to invade France during the spring of 1940. The main assault plan called *Fall Braun* called for an assault between Neuf-Brisach and Switzerland by two Italian Corps. At the same time, three secondary assaults would take place: *Panther* with an Italian corps which would cross the Rhine to the north of Strassbourg, *Lüchs* with the 7th Army that would cross the Rhine to the south of Strassbourg and *Tiger* with the 1st Army in the Saar area. However, the Italians declined to take part and the Germans were forced to review the plan with

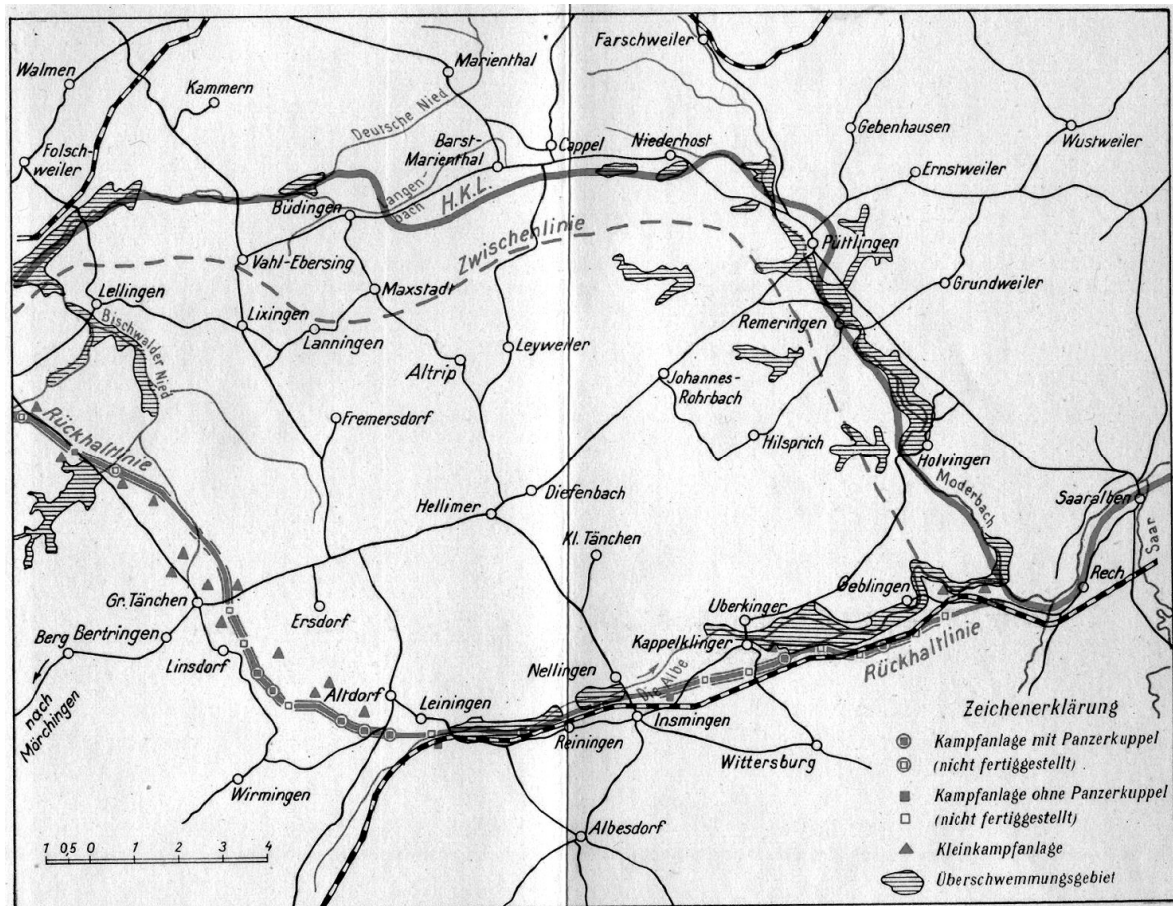


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fewer resources. Finally only *Tiger* remained with an assault in the Saar area by the 1st Army and an assault over the Rhine with the 7th Army between Schoenau and Neuf-Brisach under the code *Kleiner Bär*. Both armies had to join in the Vosges. The assault was envisaged to be from 12th June onwards.

From 29th May onwards, the Germans started to put pressure on the French positions with small assaults by Guenbouse, Loupershouse, Marienthal, Holbach-lès-Saint Avold and Puttlinge. The French responded but could not avoid that the Germans gained some ground. For General Hubert of the 20th CA (Corps d'Armée) it was clear that the Germans were seeking to make contact with the Maginot Line. He was right because on the 13th June, increased troop movements were observed in the woods of Puttlinge and Sarralbe.



The Saar area with the first and second line. Out of the German Denkschrift.

A small French victory at the Saar

Due to the encirclement of the Belgian army, the British Expedition Force (BEF) and a big part of the French army at the coast near Dunkirk, the French high command decided to withdraw the troops from the Maginot Line to avoid another encirclement. First, the interval troops had to



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leave, then the crews of the CORF casemates and finally the forts had to be abandoned. The troops in the Saar area had to leave on the 14th of June at 2100 Hr. Only a few men were to occupy the bunkers to give the illusion that there were soldiers present.

On the 14th of June, the 1st Army of General Erwin von Witzleben started the assault with 9 divisions under the code name "Tiger". The 1st Army had three army corps the 30th with infantry divisions 258 and 93, the 12th with infantry divisions 268 and 75 and the 24th with infantry divisions 60 and 252. On the second line there were the 79th, 198th and 16th Infantry Division.

The infantry was going to be supported by the biggest concentration of artillery of the 1939-40 campaign with 4 batteries of railroad guns, 2 batteries of 420 mm howitzers, 1 battery of 305 mm howitzers. In total there were 259 batteries with a capacity of more than 1000 guns.

Moreover, each regiment was equipped with 88 mm and 37 mm anti-tank guns. Finally the French positions were going to be bombed by Stuka dive bombers and Heinkel bombers.

The French had 5 regiments of the Defensive Sector of the Saar (69^e RIF, 82^e RIF, 174^e RIF, 41^e RMIC, 51^e RMIC), the 20th Army Corps with the 52nd Infantry Division and the Polish 1st Grenadier Division.

The French had observed the German troop movements and had bombarded them with artillery which had caused numerous casualties.

The German artillery bombardment started at 0600 Hr and stopped at 0900 Hr. The French responded accurately with their artillery on the waiting troops which caused again casualties.

There was a dense fog and the advance to the barbed wire was difficult and due to the fog, there was also no air support.

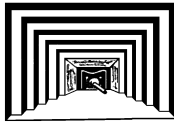


A Stuka dive bomber.

The Germans were stopped at the first line of casemates and successive assaults did not work, not even when the Luftwaffe bombarded the bunkers after the fog cleared. Some small advance posts fell into German hands and they created a gap in the Bois de Kalmerich. But, generally, the German offensive got stuck on the weakest chain of the Maginot Line!

That evening General von Witzleben evaluated the situation with his staff officers. The losses were heavy (about 1000 dead and 4000 wounded) and no ground gained. On the one hand, he had had orders from Hitler not to go to the ultimate, but on the other he wanted his victory in the France campaign as well. So he was hesitating and it looked like that he was going to abandon the assault.

Meanwhile, the French were going to start the withdraw operation at 2200 Hr. Runners were to take the instructions to the different company command posts. Unfortunately, the runner who has been sent to the pc of the 6^e Cie of the II/174th RIF in the Bois de Kalmerich was caught by the Germans and the information was provided to von Witzleben on the same evening. This brought of course a review of the whole operation and the Germans decided to continue the assault on



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the next day. Moreover the roads of the withdrawal were now known to the Germans who started to bombard these roads from 2230 Hr on.

The next day the Germans succeeded in their assault and the troops dispersed behind the Maginot forts. This meant that the crew couldn't evacuate anymore and that the vulnerable entrances and unprotected walls on the rear were exposed to the German artillery.

What to see?

There are no forts or CORF casemates, nevertheless it's an interesting area with a lot of variation.

We will give here a small overview of it. One of our members, Paul Thibaut, wrote the first part.

1. The Aquatic Maginot Line : A Field Trip near Barst

Paul THIBAUT

Background

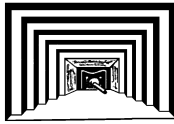
Between Saint-Avold and Sarreguemines there's a very special area of the Maginot Line of about 30 Km. The Saarland in Germany was added to France after the First World War. It was only in 1935 that the region returned to Germany after a referendum. Until then it would not have been correct of France to reinforce this part of the border. That caused also that the Maginot Line had to be completed much later. Due to this fact France chose for a quick solution of field fortifications and flood plains. This gave the name Ligne Maginot Aquatique to the book of Paul Marque of 1989.

A visit of a very specific part of this sector

I had to be in the area for my job and I had been looking on Google Earth to see if I could find something of the Maginot Line. And yes, I'd found a location where a concrete railway wagon stands. It could block a road where it crossed a line of vertical steel I-beams. Once there, just outside the village Barst, there was a lot more to see. A kind old man of 90 was apparently the guide. He's a member of a small enthusiast Group of volunteers who created this open-air museum which is freely accessible. They have collected a lot of equipment that they had found in the region and five STG (Service Technique du Genie) bunkers form the backdrop.



A dig in FT17 tank.



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An observation copula and the floodplain in the distance.



A dig in observation tank with a concrete entrance.



One of the STG bunkers. The 7.5 cm gun stands inside and can be visited on one of the doors open days.



In the distance, another STG bunker



A removable MG turret.



The famous road block.



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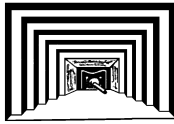
The rear of an armoured search light. They were present next to each casemate or infantry block of the Maginot forts.



A concrete mixer, a false turret and a bunker.



The road block, rails, a German tank hunter Hetzer and a reconstruction of a pile driver.



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2. The dikes and lakes

In the eastern side of the Saar area the French have created a few dikes and artificial lakes which had to control the region.

Start in Barst and drive to Hoste. Here's the first artificial lake **Hoste-Haut**. Near the village is a dike with on the left and right bunkers. On the left it's dike bunker R8B. On the right bank stand a machine gun (MG) bunker with heavy damage on the enemy side. Along the lake stands another MG bunker and somewhat further in the meadow is an anti-tank bunker. When you notice the almost disappeared wall, you realise how heavy the battles were here.



Dike bunker R8B of Hoste-Haut.



The next artificial lake is **Hoste-Bas**. Here you see the heavily damaged dike bunker R6B. On the other side of the road is the ruin of an anti-tank bunker which was demolished during the war to make a propaganda movie.

Dike bunker R6B of Hoste-Bas.



A bit further lies the **Bois de Kalmerich** in which still stands the bunker of the command post of Captain Daubenton. At the rim of the wood there are two casemates for a 25 mm anti-tank gun. A bit further lie two STG double-casemates MC28 and MC29.

The embrasures of casemate MC29.

The Bois de Kalmerich was the only place in the Saar area where the Germans broke through the line.



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The forest was defended by the 6th company under the command of Captain Daubenton of the 174th RIF. Both STG casemates weren't finished yet. The copula, the doors and the lids were still missing. After the artillery bombardment, 37 mm anti-tank guns could fire a few shells into



The bunker for a 25 mm anti-tank gun. Left, in 2006 and right, in 1940.

the unprotected embrasures. It was even worse with casemate MC29. A 88 mm anti-tank gun could shoot a breach in the unprotected wall whereby the majority of the crew were eliminated. Only four men survived. German assault troops of battalion I/125 of the 268th Infantry Division crossed the Holsterbach and took in casemate MC29 and neared the rim of the wood. They tried to surround casemate MC28, but they were kept away by machinegun fire. One of the bunkers for a 25 mm anti-tank gun took a shell (the impact in the armoured plate is still visible) and wounded several soldiers. Assault troops could approach the casemate and a short skirmish took place. Meanwhile the French crew was summoned in French to surrender, but they did after a few smoke grenades were thrown into the bunker. The same French spokesman was sent to casemate MC28 to summon the crew to surrender because the casemate was undermined. The same spokesman was sent to the bunker of Daubenton, but he was sent away. At noon the forest was bombed by several dive bombers (Stuka's) whereby casemate MC29 took a direct hit. During the afternoon the Germans assaulted again, but were stopped again by the bunker of Daubenton. A 37 mm anti-tank gun destroyed two machine guns and hand grenades forced the French to surrender.



The command bunker of Capitaine Daubenton in 1940 and in 2006.



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After **Puttrelange-aux-Lacs** towards **Rémering-lès-Puttrelange**, there are four bunkers of which one STG casemate. On the left there's the dike "Digue de Puttrelange" with a small bridge over the lock to keep the water level of the Mutterbach under control.

The dike at Puttrelange.

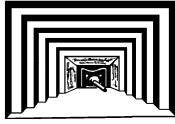


In the beginning of Rémering, you see the dike "Digue de Rémering" with a bridge and a lock. At the other side of the bridge stands dike bunker R12B which is accessible. In front of the bunker there is a series of anti-tank rails in the dike.



Dike bunker R12B at the dike of Rémering.





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3. The cabinet of rarities

Indeed, on a short distance from each other, you can discover three different types of steel copulas.

Start in the village Teting and drive towards Folschwiller. Stop the car just outside the village near a shed on the right of the road. Behind the shed, on the top of the hill there's a casemate with a unique **Pamart** copula from 1916 for two Hotchkiss machine guns. Be aware that the casemate will be hidden by crops during the summer.



At the other side of the road, opposite the shed, you'll see a terp which is the back of a RFM Mle 1936 casemate for a machine gun and a 47 mm gun type Marine 1885. The typical carriage of the gun is still present here.

The other copula is more difficult to locate. Drive back to Teting and take the first street to the left. Go under the railway, turn left and drive over the river Nied Allemande. It was intended that this valley be flooded in 1940. When the road divides in two, keep right. At the dirt road at the next bunker you follow a path upwards. Here are two casemates, one for an anti-tank gun and the other for a copula **Héron-Fontaine**. The copula was called to the fort where it was installed. After the dismantling of the fort it was intended that the copula go to a Maginot fort near Briançon, but finally it ended in the Saar area. The casemate is known as the "Observatoire du Tattenholz". On the same hill you see two casemates for a Hotchkiss machine gun. One is accessible and has still the carriage for a machine gun.





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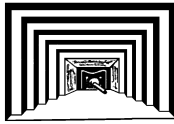
For the third copula, continue on this road to the village Guessling-Hémering and turn right. Continue to the village and keep the church on the left and take the first road to the right. Turn immediately again to the right and leave the car where the road comes a dirt road. Walk up the hill to a row of trees on the summit and then to the right. Under high tension cables you see a copula **Digoin**. This kind of copula is a classic observation copula in a Séré de Rivières fortresses from 1875 to 1918. The name Digoin comes from the central depot for armoured parts.

4. The second line

During the Phony War, "Drôle de guerre", from September 1939 to May 1940, the troops were mainly kept busy by digging field reinforcements. Meanwhile a number of STG casemates were built in the north and the Saar area, but the most important construction was the creation of a second line to give the defence line more depth. It consisted of STG casemates and it was called the CEZF Line (Commission d'Etude des Zone Fortifiées). It was built around Cassel and in the Saar area. Due to the very severe winter from 1939-1940, the completion was extremely delayed. Some casemates missed even their copulas!



CEZF casemate C13.



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The concept was easy. If the enemy were to break through, then he had to be stopped by the second line. But the war was that close (1939-1940) that it would not have any effect. Moreover it concerned here only the weakest sectors.

The casemates of the CEZF Line were equipped with a copula GFM, type C. They had two guns of 25 or 47 mm and two Hotchkiss machine guns.

To see some of them, you start in Guessling-Hémering and you drive to Grostenquin. A double STG casemate stands just before the lake. This is number C7. The wet moat around the casemate was not intentional, but the construction pit.

After Linstroff, you have STG double casemate C9 on your left and somewhat further you can reach C10 via an asphalt road on the left. This one has exploded and you can climb the roof to have a better look at such a copula GFM type C.

South of Francaltroff, there are three CEZF casemates, C11, C12 and C13. C13 is open and next to it stand an US halftrack M3 for a quadruple .50 machine gun. C11 has a frame to camouflage it as a barn.



C11 with the frame to look like a barn.



The C-type copula of the CEZF casemates. This one is from C12.

Casemate C7. The water is not a wet moat, but an unfinished building pit.



Thanks to Yvonne Mayo for the spell check.